

## TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS IN THE CREATION OF TIBETAN THANGKA PAINTING

This is a sacred art, a path which can  
take you to enlightenment.

*Rezende*

Buddhist art is one of the manifestations of the spiritual aspirations of people in search of perfection. A tremendous number of books, sculptures, paintings, ritual objects, temples, etc. were created by Buddhist pilgrims in response to these aspirations, and also to inspire the ones who follow the path of the Buddha. Tibetan iconography, one of the most remarkable examples of Buddhist art, has a tremendously sacred meaning. It is full of images of enlightened beings, which — as iconographic symbols — express different aspects of Buddhist teachings. Thangka paintings are undoubtedly the most essential part of Tibetan art. Thangkas express the highest reality, and give form to the fundamental Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist notion of emptiness (*stong pa nyid*). The reality expressed in a thangka is inseparable from human nature; that is why its comprehension depends mainly on the awakening of the mind. These artifacts, as instruments, aim to reveal the real nature of the mind. This is their sacred meaning — to lead the ordinary mind to the state of supreme enlightenment.

Tibetan iconography is not simply a reflection of devotion to Buddhist teachings, nor is it merely an illustration to sacred texts; rather, it embodies the whole symbolism of Buddhism and the wisdom of the Buddha, expressed by images. This makes Tibetan art not only an object of religious worship, but an invaluable part of Buddhist practice of meditation and awareness. Tibetan artists express not only divine images, but also profound philosophical concepts, subtle energies, and states of mind that are unseen with the eyes and are realized only in the process of spiritual practice. These artists materialized manifestations of higher realities, and transformed the absolute wisdom of emptiness into form, measurable by human senses. At the same time they inspire the “viewer” to transform this form again into emptiness through contemplation on the ephemeral nature of these images. This provokes different questions such as: Is Tibetan art really art? What exactly is art? What is the main aim of Tibetan art? What is the connection between traditions and innovations in Tibetan art? Tibetan Buddhist art asks numerous questions and at the same time provides numerous answers, leaving the “viewers” to find their own way, whether in the path to enlightenment, the salvation from cyclic existence,

the separation of light from darkness, the separation of form from emptiness, or simply the natural way to beauty through contemplation of the images.

Tibetan artifacts can be seen as murals in temples and monasteries, as illustrations for religious manuscripts, as medical and astrological treatises, and as Buddhist “icons” — called “thangkas” — with deep religious meaning. The Tibetan word “thangka” derives from the root “thang”, which means “plain” or “flat area”. “Thangka” is translated as “hanging scroll painting”; it may be used for decoration, transmission of teaching, or visualization practice. Instead of “thangka”, the classical Tibetan language uses the words “*ri mo*” (“painting/picture”) or “*sku brnyan*” (“image”).

There are different reasons for and motifs in the creation of a thangka. The most common is the aspiration to create an object of worship. This is an act that Tibetans believe could lead to the accumulation of spiritual merit (both for the artist who created the thangka and for the viewer). Even glancing at the thangka is perceived by Buddhists as a virtuous act. They are used as an important element of Buddhist practice. Therefore Tibetans order a variety of religious images, depending on their specific needs and spiritual practices. It is common belief that there exists an important relationship between the deities painted on the thangka and the desired result. It is also believed that meditation on various iconographic images helps the practitioner’s mind reach the awareness of different realities and achieve certain goals. Creating a Buddhist “icon” is considered a virtuous act in itself, and also — and more importantly — provides an opportunity for further religious activities. It is believed that after obtaining thangkas, a Buddhist practitioner has a greater chance to realize the practice of the respective deity, praying to him or her and meditate on his or her image. A thangka can be ordered in order to gain health, prosperity and a long and happy life. Very often it is ordered to heal a sick person or to overcome various difficulties in everyday life or spiritual practice. Another reason Tibetans order a thangka involves the death of a relative or friend. These thangkas are called “signs of a happy rebirth” and aim to create better conditions for passing through intermediate states after death (*bar do*). Such paintings are created in the forty-nine day period after the person’s death, during which it is believed that the next rebirth has not occurred. Tibetan lamas determine the most appropriate deity to be depicted, usually relying on Buddhist astrological texts but sometimes guided by their own sense of the character of the deceased.

Numerous Tibetan “icons” are inspired mainly by the universal human desire (in this specific cultural context) to avoid suffering and to ensure a long and prosperous life. Virtuous creation of the thangka is supported by the belief in the principle of karma — the law of cause and effect — according to which good deeds lead to a happy existence. The ultimate goal of every virtuous thought or deed of Tibetan Buddhists is to achieve

Buddhahood, not only for personal happiness but for the welfare of all beings. Thus, apart from the wish for a temporary benefit and happiness, there is the wish to achieve final liberation, which — it is believed — will save all beings from suffering.

A Tibetan Buddhist “icon” can display a whole pantheon of deities and objects (for instance various peaceful and wrathful deities, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Dharma protectors, saints, or sacred objects like stupas, monasteries or temples) that express the qualities of the enlightened mind with which practitioners identify during the path to enlightenment. Also, thangkas can display Buddhist teachings related to the arrangement of the physical universe, various ritual objects, medical and astrological charts, and so on.

In the context of the Tibetan spiritual tradition, Buddhist art functions as a “physical support” (*rten*), which represents the embodiment of enlightened body, speech and mind. To function as a sacred object the work of art must be ritually blessed by the ceremony of consecration (*rab gnas*), during which the artwork is considered to embody the spirit of enlightenment. Not all religious paintings, however, fit into this category. Some thangkas illustrate certain aspects of Buddhist doctrine, without depicting Buddhas or deities. They are called “didactic paintings” and include illustrations of ritual objects, monastic attributes and symbolic representations of religious and cosmological concepts. There is another group of paintings, which are neither “physical support” nor “didactic”. Among them are paintings that have a ritualistic purpose and serve as offerings to the main images. In The Tibetan iconographic tradition also includes some rare paintings that are poetic, medical or astrological charts.

Paintings that express the bodily form of enlightened beings are considered “supporting the body” (*sku rten*). The depicted images can be divided into subcategories according to whether they can be recorded in a temporal or spatial frame. Most thangkas position their objects in a world beyond ordinary time and space, for example in the so-called “Pure realm” (*dag pa zhing khams*). They do not depict the specific moment, but rather represent life and the presence of Buddha nature. In contrast to these paintings, other compositions have the intent of clearly depicting one or more episodes in the life of the selected image, and thereby localizing the historical event or legendary past. These thangkas are called “narrative paintings”. They depict important events in the lives of saints or enlightened beings, such as the twelve great events in Buddha’s life or events in the life of the Tibetan saint Milarepa. Such paintings could also be called “biographical”. Another kind of “narrative thangka” depicts important events from the life of significant figures in Buddhism, such as Buddha’s previous lives described in “Jatakas”. “Narrative paintings” may be depicted as a composition with one figure, or as a series of compositions, each representing one or more events. “Group” compositions consist of one

main figure (*gtso bo*) and a retinue of additional figures (*'khor*). Some group compositions, however, are depicted without a main figure. An example of group composition with a main figure is a mandala (*dkyil 'khor*), where the deities are arranged symmetrically around the central figure. Some compositions include one central image surrounded by numerous identical figures or different aspects of the main deity. Their number can reach up to one hundred or two hundred. Such paintings are believed to bring more virtues because many images are multiplied, increasing the power of the “icon”.

Another group of compositions that also show a major figure with an entourage, shows the line of transmission of the teachings of a particular religious tradition of Vajrayana. These paintings, called “refuge trees”, depict the genealogy of transmission of teachings from its beginning to the present teacher. The “refuge tree” depicts objects or images, which Buddhists take refuge in as a basis for their practice\*.

## The Bridge Between Traditions and Innovations

If we talk about traditions and innovations, we need to search for the bridge that connects them. The artist, living in particular culture environment, is such a bridge. The life, study, practice and creativity of the artist are the mirror in which we can see the reflections of traditions and innovations. The work of the artist — the art itself — is also such a bridge. Every piece of art, in one way or another, creates a link between the past, present and future, and expresses their union. In the case of Tibetan culture as a living tradition (spread all over the world due to particular political circumstances) we can see innovations and the influences of other cultures in different spheres of Tibetan cultural life. Tibetan art, as sacred Buddhist art, preserves traditions; innovations are usually based on the canon. The life and works of some Tibetan artists consists of elements of innovations, which nevertheless remain deeply rooted in the tradition itself.

Traditionally, Tibetan artists are monks who paint the divine image as part of their daily spiritual practice. The painters of thangkas are usually anonymous. Anonymous authorship in the creation of sacred images is a feature of the Eastern iconographic tradition as a whole. The artist is seen as a mediator, and as a means through which the divine image and even supernatural reality can be materialized in the sensory world through the language of art. The artistic process itself is accepted

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\* “Refuge” in the context of Buddhism is taken in “The Three jewels” (*dkon mchog gsum*) — Buddha (*sangs rgyas*), Dharma (*chos*) and Sangha (*dge'dun*) but Vajrayana includes current and past teachers from the tradition, yidams, dakas, dakini, Dharma protectors, etc.

as an act that excludes his personality. Although Tibetan artists are traditionally anonymous, there are exceptions — examples of remarkable artists from the Land of Snows who are also great lamas and spiritual teachers, and who have left significant traces in the artistic heritage of this region.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Karmapa Choying Dorje (1604–1674) was one of the most exceptional artists in Tibetan culture. He was a talented painter and sculptor even at a young age. He had ample opportunity to study early statues during his recurring visits to the Jokhang temple in Lhasa. His activities as a painter were evidently influenced by the Chinese tradition. However, he also created paintings influenced by Kashmir and Western Tibetan styles.

Drugpa Kunzig Chokyi Nangwa (1768–1822) was the 8<sup>th</sup> Drugchen of the Drugpa Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, and a great artist. He wrote many volumes about oral teachings and rituals. He was famous for his power of prediction, and for recognizing and finding incarnate lamas (*sprul sku*).

Gendun Chopel (1903–1951) was a creative and controversial figure, considered by many to have been one of the most important Tibetan intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a philosopher, historian, artist, translator, traveler and a campaigner for the modernization of Tibet. He travelled extensively throughout the Indian subcontinent, learned Sanskrit, Pali and English, and collaborated with George Roerich in his monumental translation of Go Lotsawa's "Blue Annals". Gendun Chopel, famous as the "crazy saint" and "crazy monk" wrote a poem in 1946, that expresses the attitude of the Tibetans towards the new:

In Tibet, everything that is old  
Is a work of Buddha  
And everything that is new  
Is a work of the Devil  
This is the sad tradition of our country.

[Angry monk reflection of Tibet]

According to his poem, for Tibetans the "old" is the "work of Buddha", which is equal to the sacred, pure and true, and the "new" is the "work of the Devil" — negative and destructive. Provoked by these perceptions of the Tibetans he dedicated his work to the modernization of Tibet.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Kyabgon Khamtrul Rinpoche Dongyud Nyima (1931–1980) was a great scholar and well versed in the traditional art of thangka painting, ritual dances, Tibetan medicine, traditional woodcraft and metal craft. In 1969 he re-established his main seat, Khampagar Monastery, in a place called Tashi Jong in India.

Chogyam Trungpa (1939–1987) was one of leading Buddhist teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a pioneer in bringing Buddhism to the West. He was a Buddhist meditation master, a holder of both the Kagyu and Nyingma



lineages, the 11<sup>th</sup> Trungpa tulku, supreme abbot of the Surmang monasteries, a scholar, teacher, poet, artist, calligrapher who coined the term “Dharma art”, and someone whose teachings on Dharma art describe a profound connection between the meditative mind and the creative process. According to him the first Dharma art lesson is to look deep into empty space — like a piece of blank paper. He calls this the “magic mirror” and explains that “if you look deep into it, you will connect with the realm where every thing that ever was, is, or will be already exists. Contemplating the traditional qualities of emptiness such as all pervading, all accommodating, no obstructions and so on, you wait, focusing your intention and then a spark will appear. This is the seed of your art work” [Shambala times...].

The 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, is the current spiritual leader of the Karma Kagyu lineage, one of the major traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Born in Eastern Tibet in 1985, he was recognized at the age of seven through a prediction letter. Each of the Karmapas has played a very important role in preserving and propagating the Buddhist teachings. With the passing years, the Karmapa’s artistic abilities have flourished. In addition to writing poetry, he has become a skilled artist in drawing, painting, and calligraphy. According to him the creative process is an expression of human identity and complete freedom [Save Tibet].

In addition to the artists who are preserving Tibetan sacred art, there are several institutions also dedicated to this aim. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution the ancient traditional arts in Tibet suffered irreparable damage when numerous artifacts were destroyed. In addition, the degeneration of the authentic Buddhist painting traditions from the Himalayan region continues today, because of the commercialisation of thangka production for a tourist market. The fact that people without proper training are producing thangkas with incorrect iconography, portends the loss of the sacred meaning and purpose of this ancient art form.

Significant institutions for the preservation and study of thangka paintings outside of Tibet include Norbulingka Institute in Dharamsala, India, and Tsering Art School in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Norbulingka Institute was founded by H. H. the Dalai Lama and is dedicated to preserving tradition and restoring standards by providing training, education and employment for Tibetans. It was founded in 1988 as part of the Department of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration. It creatively and respectfully reconciles the traditional with the modern, and seeks to create an international awareness of Tibetan values and their expression in art and literature. The main painting master at Norbulingka Institute was Temba Chophel (1959–2007). He trained in applique and later studied thangka painting. In 1984 he left Tibet for India, becoming a monk at Drepung Gomang Monastery in South India. He joined Norbulingka Institute in 1989 and lived for his art, combining

an extraordinarily wide-ranging artistic talent with an encyclopedic knowledge of Tibetan heritage [Norbulinka Institute].

Tsering Art School is a school for thangka painting. It is part of Shechen monastery, and was established by Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche in 1996 in response to the urgent need for young artists to be able to receive a complete and thorough training in a pure and authentic lineage of thangka painting. The goal of the school is thus to provide the opportunity for young people from the Himalayan region and abroad to acquire the knowledge and skill to keep this sacred tradition alive. The main painting master at Tsering Art School is Konchog Lhadrepa, who trained under Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910–1991) as his attendant. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche sent him at the age of 19 to Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim to train with the thangka painter Lhadre Tragyel, a famed master of the Karma Gadri lineage [Tsering Art School].

Both of these thangka painting schools provide traditional education mainly for Tibetans. The innovation that occurred in their programmes is that in recent years they have also begun to provide education to foreigners, though only a few. An example of such a student is Tiffani Gyatso, the first foreigner at the Norbulingka Institute. She was born in 1981 in Brazil. In 2000 she drove from Germany, through Russia to Mongolia where she saw thangka paintings for the first time and decided that she would learn how to paint them. In 2003 she was accepted at the Norbulingka Institute and studied thangka painting until 2006. In 2007 she was invited to coordinate the murals of the Buddhist temple Caminho do Meio in Rio Grande do Sul, in southern Brazil. This remarkable project was completed in 2012. She is author of the book “Life and Thangka: Searching for Truth through Sacred Arts”, and combines in her works traditional thangka painting and modern art. She expresses the connection between traditional and modern art in the following way: “Thangka is a discipline that I need to practice when modern art had taken me too deep. The two opposites of art bring me balance. Thangka is the bread and modern art like water — though only bread makes it too dry and only water does not feed you. I need both — discipline and freedom” [Tiffani N. Gyatso].

Another example of a foreign student of thangka painting is Ros’Ana Hildt, who graduated from Tsering Art School. She was also born in Brazil, and after spending some time in Nepal now works mainly in France.

Both artists are remarkable examples of innovations in the training of thangka painters, not only as foreigners but also as female artists who have the freedom to study along with monks and male laypeople.

Another bridge between traditions and innovations can be found in the international cultural initiatives dedicated to the research of Buddhist art, and particularly the Tibetan artistic tradition. If we look at Tibetan

history, we cannot find examples of gatherings of international scientists meeting to discuss the state of the Tibetan art, neither within Tibet nor outside of it. The fact that such initiatives exist nowadays is innovative from the perspective of the traditional culture of “hidden Tibet”, and is an example of how globalization has affected Buddhist art. In “the new world”, borders that separate should be replaced with bridges that unite the world. The symposium “Contemporary Buddhist art: traditions and innovations” is itself a bridge between worlds and between times. We can try to see the event itself reflected in art, like one modern *thangka* painting and try to imagine how it will look like? What would art represented in art look like? Actually, examples of this can be found even in Tibetan art like an ancient *thangka* with the portrait of Chokyi Jungne, the 8<sup>th</sup> Situ Panchen (1700–1774) (pl. 24). At its lower left one sees two artists drawing Buddha figures on stretched cloth frames, and at the top left one sees a big blank *thangka* that (according to the explanations) is waiting to be inscribed with his the 8<sup>th</sup> Situ Panchen’s proclamation [Himalayan art...]. A blank painting surface is an inspiring motif in art, like a blank page that waits for the future generation to write on it, or a mirror that reflects the universal truth beyond time and space\*. Talking about Buddhist art, or any aspect of Buddha Dharma, is all about searching for the truth. As Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche says: “Seeing the truth is so important in the Buddhist path. So what we need to do is to see the truth. Seeing the truth is what we call wisdom. And that is the most important blessing of the Buddha” [Jast Dhahma Quotes]. Following the path of searching for the truth, we have to find the Middle way between old and new and build a bridge between traditions and innovations in order to see more clearly the reality reflected in the mirror of human history.

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Angry monk reflection on Tibet [site]. URL: [http://www.angrymonkthefilm.ch/en/gendun\\_choephel/](http://www.angrymonkthefilm.ch/en/gendun_choephel/) (mode of access: 23.03.2012).

Shambhala times Community News Magazine [site]. URL: <http://shambhala-times.org/2012/03/24/what-is-the-heart-of-dharma-art/> (mode of access: 24.03.2012).

Save Tibet [site]. URL: <http://savetibet.ru/2013/06/06/karmapa.html> (mode of access: 06.06.2013).

Norbulingka Institute [site]. URL: <http://www.norbulingka.org/> (mode of access: 06.06.2013).

Tsering Art School [site]. URL: <http://www.tseringschool.org/> (mode of access: 06.06.2013).

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\* There is another version of this portrait where at the lower left is only one artist draws a Buddha figure on a canvas and at the top left is a large *thangka* that is not blank but has been inscribed with a proclamation by Situ Panchen Chokyi Jungne.



Tiffani N. Gyatso [site]. URL: [http://www.tiffanigyatso.com/#!\\_site\\_english/the-artist](http://www.tiffanigyatso.com/#!_site_english/the-artist) (mode of access: 14.04.2013).

Himalayan art resources [site]. URL: <http://www.himalayanart.org/image.cfm/65592/alt/65592C.html> (mode of access: 14.04.2013).

Jast Dharma Quotes [site]. URL: <http://quotes.justdharma.com/category/dzongsar-khyentse-rinpoche/> (mode of access: 20.06.2013).

**S. B. Bardaleyeva**

*Ulan-Ude*

## **TRADITIONS OF S.-TS. TSYBIKOV SCHOOL AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE ART OF MODERN MASTERS**

In Soviet period “datsan art” in Buryatia for a long time was a closed topic, the lamas’ names were concealed, and Buddhist ritual objects remained “under lock” in the museums’ vaults. Most of the datsans were destroyed, and the Buryat works of art were destroyed with them, since this art was, for the most part, religious. Many ritual objects were exported from Buryatia, lost or destroyed.

The Buddhist collection of the M. N. Khangalov Museum of the History of Buryatia was gathered from the destroyed datsans in 1930s; most of the Buddhist sculptures were brought in from the Yangazhinsky datsan.

Buddhist art from Buryatia was exhibited for the first time in Moscow, in 1970, at the exhibition called “Buddhist Art of Buryatia, XVIII – Beginning of XX Centuries”, and later, in 1971, in the city of Ulan-Ude. This was the beginning of the research and scholarly attribution of Buddhist collections. Museum personnel – namely, curators Zh. Zh. Zhabon and N. B. Badlayeva – found informers who could name the authors of the artworks and tell something about them. Despite the fact that Buddhist art was for the most part anonymous, there were still living witnesses who remembered the masters. As a result, the exhibition catalogue contained, for the first time, the names of many datsan artists.

1963 saw the publication of an article co-written by a local historian G. L. Lenhoboyev and a Buddhist scholar K. M. Gerasimova, “Materialy o narodnykh umeltsakh Orongoya” (“Materials on Folk Craftsmen of Orongoy”) [Lenhoboyev, Gerasimova, p. 135–153]. This article mentioned for the first time the name of sculptor, architect, construction project manager, lama of Yangazhinsky datsan Sanzhi-Tsybik Tsybikov.

Buddhist ritual art flowered at the end of XIX and beginning of the XX century. This outstanding period of Buryat iconographic culture is exemplified by the sculpture works of “uran darhan” S.-Ts. Tsybikov and his pupils. The school of S.-Ts. Tsybikov was the first in the line of established



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**Сигу Панчен**

Тханка. Восточный Тибет. 1800–1899-е гг.  
Художественный музей Рубина, Нью-Йорк

**Situ Panchen**

Thangka. Eastern Tibet. 1800–1899  
Rubin Museum of Art, New York